

STUDENT UNIT RECORD ENROLLMENT (S.U.R.E.) SYSTEM

Overview:

The SURE system is designed to strengthen the capacity of the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education to discharge its research, planning, and coordinating responsibilities, and to assist institutions in a variety of ways, e.g., by tracking their transfers, reducing their need to fill out forms, etc. It is a comprehensive collection, storage, and retrieval system for computer-readable data on each student enrolled and on each graduate. All 31 of New Jersey's public colleges and universities—and six independent institutions—currently participate in SURE. The enrollment component of SURE is a fall and spring semester "snapshot"; the degrees conferred component captures data for an entire academic/(state fiscal) year. Institutions submit their SURE files by e-mail to the Commission's Office of Research & Policy Analysis, which processes and analyzes the data. Each student record bears a unique identifier—a social security number (SSN)—as well as various student-specific demographic, academic, and education process data. There are 27 such variables to be reported for each enrollee, and 18 for each graduate.

The unit record format provides an enriched data base, permitting much more sophisticated analyses than are possible with aggregate data. The use of a standard, unique identifier permits the tracking of students, as well as the merging of SURE data with other Commission, national, and Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA) data bases (e.g., TAG/EOF). Both features greatly enhance the Commission's ability to report—and to assist institutions in reporting—the outcomes of higher education, increasingly needed to respond to pressures on the higher education system for greater accountability. The Commission also aggregates each institutional member's data into IPEDS formats, thus doing away with the need to fill out any forms on enrolled students or degrees conferred.

Principles:

Certain principles have guided the development of the SURE system; major considerations included maintaining the confidentiality of individual-level data, as well as facilitating research and planning at both the statewide and institutional levels. SURE's file structure design and organization, the use of statistical/data management software, and a dual mainframe/PC computing environment address the latter goal. In addition, the Commission makes the SAS computer programs it develops accessible to participants. Another major objective has been the standardization and comparability of data.

Benefits:

SURE system data are used by the Commission to perform various analyses. For example, serially constructed data sets are produced for systemwide longitudinal studies of retention, attrition, and other issues where temporal relationships are important. The SURE system also produces aggregate statistics on each institution, to fulfill certain federal and state reporting requirements.

In addition to supporting systemwide outcomes research and reducing institutional reporting burdens, SURE offers participating institutions opportunities to conduct their own customized research. They can obtain the longitudinal files on their entering freshman cohorts. Also available upon request are Participant Use Files, one for each semester's enrollment and one for each year's degrees, which together contain a complete (systemwide) set of data, modified by removal of the SSNs (to prevent disclosure of confidential information). Finally, the Commission's research staff performs special analyses for individual institutions and other entities upon request.

The IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey (GRS) (which, like all IPEDS forms developed by the Center for Education Statistics [USDE], is required of all postsecondary institutions that have students receiving federal student loans), has proved to be a challenge for some institutions. The SURE system has played a crucial role in assisting NJ public institutions in this regard. Since the GRS requires six years of data for all baccalaureate institutions, the independent institutions in SURE have not yet received this benefit. However, if they provide some past data to the Commission, we will be able to help them immediately with the GRS. Of course, this retroactive approach is in no way required of new SURE members; but it is an option that is available to all such institutions, and does have clear advantages, especially since other surveys of institutions (e.g., Student Right-to-Know, NCAA, etc.) have standardized around the GRS approach, so that the latter serves the purposes of the former.

Addendum—History:

In the first year (1985), the state colleges/universities initiated system development with their pilot fall enrollment submissions. They were joined in 1986, also on a test basis, by 18 of the 19 community colleges. Rutgers submitted its SURE pilot in fall 1987; NJIT followed suit the next year, and UMDNJ, the next (1989). The one remaining community college joined the system in 1990. The degrees component phase-in followed a slightly different schedule, starting in 1986-87; the last degrees conferred pilot was produced in 1990-91. In 1995 three independent institutions joined SURE; three others have joined since then, and still others have expressed an interest.